

MEMORANDUM

To: D. Ellsberg

Date: 9/23/69

From: Konrad Kellen

This is a first first draft of a possible letter. Please do not show it around and let me know at our meeting today what you think.

Draft
K. Kellen
9/22/69

A considerable time ago, during the Johnson administration, the undersigned reached the conclusion that in U.S. national interest, as well as in the interest of Vietnam and the world in general, the war in Vietnam had to be terminated, regardless of what the ultimate local consequences would be. We felt that, no matter what the U.S. objective (and some of us had always had our doubts as to the legitimacy and attainability of any of the constantly shifting declared objectives), the human, moral and material cost of that increasingly quixotic venture had long surpassed in value anything that could either be gained or averted. Our conclusion that the war had to be liquidated -- not on condition of this, that, or the other thing, nor in 1971, 1972 or 1974, but without further military or diplomatic effort -- was based on the enormous amount of information both privileged and open that we as analysts had been working with for the past several years. When we had reached our conclusions we conveyed them to the appropriate places.

The present administration after experimenting with some new approaches seems to us stuck in the same ^{self-made trap} ~~unfortunate vicious circle~~ that its predecessor was: to ^{make our extrication contingent} ~~insist~~ on certain aspects of the outcome over which it has no control, and which it can neither bring about by force of arms nor diplomacy. It serves no purpose to assume the posture of the generous and reasonable opponent who has made great concessions without seeing them reciprocated, or to bewail or flail the enemy's intransigence or the fact that, as we see it, he is not seriously interested" in peace or negotiations. Even if he wasn't that would only be because he is the red devil we consider him to be; we cannot have it both ways.

But the main point is that by making conditions the "enemy" is not willing to meet, and we seem to be unable to extract, we turn the control of the war and

our part in it to Hanoi. It is Hanoi which now decides whether the United States will live in war or peace, whether its budgets will be strained beyond all reason, whether the United States will continue to lose more of its prestige in the world, whether the draft must be modified, whether the students are rioting or not. There is, of course, a school of thought according to which both the casualties and the financial costs can be reduced so as to "build the war into the American system," pursue it indefinitely, ^{perhaps} and win it that way. We believe this to be fallacious because we certainly cannot do with half the men what we could not do with our full strength.

Of course, there are many who say "you cannot prove that" and "let's therefore try some more." We believe that the first proposition is inaccurate and the second immoral and pernicious. As to the first, all the indicators that have shown for years that no progress was being or could be made still point in the same direction. As to the second, ^{to} the go on suffering casualties and inflicting many more is unacceptable in view of the situation.

What are these indicators that show beyond doubt that the situation in Vietnam is just as unpromising as it always was? First, as we can see from interrogation and other sources, "enemy" morale remains exceedingly high. Secondly, the enemy has at his disposal a whole range of strategies of harassment and interdiction against which we are essentially powerless and which he has the capability of using against us and ARVN ad infinitum. The GVN not only has failed to "improve" or "broaden its base," but the very thought that it could or even should is unrealistic. This does not mean, by the way, that it is necessarily doomed the very day we leave; this too cannot be predicted with certainty. But to prevent its downfall for certain would simply require the continuation of the war that cannot be won. To leave the GVN now to its own devices, on a genuine "sink-or-swim" basis is the only honorable termination for the conflict that would restore to the United States its freedom of movement and international dignity.

What about the "blood bath"? What about the slaying in Hue after Tet 1968? In the first place, these were and are the "enemy's" ways of fighting, just as ours is to send B-52s. It is no more certain that the enemy will continue such practices ^{after a ceasefire?} than it is likely that we will continue bombing raids. Second, even if there should be a purge, is it the task of the United States to forestall such a purge at a cost in lives, both American and Vietnamese, which is likely to far exceed in number those that are likely to get killed? The spectre of the blood purge is merely another manifestation of the incredible disproportion between costs and benefits. Third and finally, if we are really all that concerned about the possible victims of a possible VC take-over, why do we not let them come to the United States under a modified immigration policy? Throw open the gates to those who fear for their lives, and how many would want to come? Even if the figure were 100,000, why not let them enter? They are intelligent and attractive people.

Of course, there are other things involved than Vietnam in our reluctance to terminate this abominable venture. One is the shibboleth of our not standing by our friends. The answer: Nobody in his right mind can expect anybody in his right mind to do more than the United States has done for its allies. Another is that American military might would be compromised. The rejoinder to this is two-fold. As far as our counter-insurgency capabilities are concerned, they already have been compromised by the duration of the effort, even if we should "win" tomorrow. As far as our over-all capability is concerned, it cannot be regarded as being compromised in the slightest. Does anyone believe that anyone in Moscow or Peking is less afraid of the United States and its missiles than if the United States should let go of that war?

Let us just look once at the concessions that the Administration has announced the other day. "We have renounced an imposed military solution."

...into?

This simply is not so: we are now battling with force of arms to obtain what we want and what the other side does not want. "We have proposed free elections. . . ." Not only the most rudimentary preconditions for such elections exist and we know it. "We have offered to withdraw U.S. and allied forces over a 12-month period." True, but only under conditions the other does not choose to accept, for good reasons (from their point of view). "We have declared we would not retain military bases." The enemy could not care less about such a detail and does not believe it to boot. And so on down the list. We have offered nothing that is acceptable or likely to be accepted by the other side. Whether we will it's "fair" or not is immaterial; if we insist on it the war goes on, and it must not.

The undersigned -- aside from obviously taking issue with all hawks -- take issue with most so-called doves who also generally insist on conditions for termination that seem reasonable and soft enough but preclude such termination. We think that the time has come when we must take the initiative in terminating this war, which means to decide today to liquidate the war now, during the next six months at the most.